

# Roundtable discussion entitled Religion and spirituality as drivers of transformation, held between Maria del Mar Albaja, Laia de Ahumada, and Jenabou Dembaga and moderated by Clara Fons Duocastella.

The proposal is intended for students in the 4th year of compulsory secondary education, baccalaureate secondary education, vocational education, and university studies.

Classroom work proposals

## 1. Introduction

The second discussion of the **6th edition of Cosmògraf 2022<sup>1</sup>** was held on 4 November 2022, entitled **Women Transforming the World** (<http://www.manresacultura.cat/cosmograf>). *Religion and spirituality* as drivers of transformation featured the participation of the sociologist and activist Jenabou Dembaga, the Benedictine abbess Maria del Mar Albaja, and the writer and spiritualist Laia de Ahumada, and was moderated by Clara Fons Duocastella, sociologist and director of the magazine Dialogal.

The second session of the Cosmògraf 2022 cycle, *Women Transforming the World*, placed participants within the spiritual and internal and external transformation experiences of three women with backgrounds in different contexts (from the Catholic and Islamic worlds and the spiritual realm without a specific religious framework). The abbess of the Benedictine monastery of Montserrat, Maria del Mar Albaja, began the discussion by recalling her process of internal spiritual transformation, regarding the transition from a lay to a religious life, a difficult stage as during her adolescence she "found a religion that made it rather difficult for me to be myself, to be a woman, to be free, and to be Catholic." For her, religion and God were the same and, although God was a very familiar element, religion placed limitations on her as a woman with its rules, which is the reason why she followed other paths. But at one point in her life she needed to connect with something beyond what she experienced at that time in her life, to understand how to hear and accept herself, which led to a change that enabled her to continuously create herself on the way towards a life focused on searching for the absolute, the absent, God. Three factors



Maria del Mar Albaja



Laia de Ahumada



Jenabou Dembaga

made the transformation process possible: a special reading, a quality relationship with a person who saw her "with a more comprehensive look," and slowing down the pace of life she was leading at the time.

Clara Fons emphasized Jenabou Dembaga's family origins as "a Muslim family from an ethnic group in which Islam is not the majority religion." For this activist of African descent, she experienced her situation as a young person as "a tense relationship because religion was a question of identity." At the beginning, she recognized that she shied away from the concept of spirituality as well as racism and Islamophobia as a way of not entering into all these issues that help shape one's identity for people who look different from others in the society in which they live. However, there was a person who gave her reason to reflect in her adolescence. That person was a teacher, a woman who taught her the Koran and all about women who are not usually recognized (such as Aisha bint Abi Bakr and Khadijah bint Khuwaylid) and who are fundamental to understanding the Muslim communities within Islam. Therefore, the transformation that took place for her originated through her interests, through the women in her surroundings, to understanding Islam from women's point of view, and, from here, all the issues related to racism, feminism, and so on.

Brought up in a Christian family, Laia de Ahumada's experience started by letting herself be carried away or believing in certainties and not in beliefs: "the differences between what they wanted me to believe and what I felt were so clear, that I didn't believe it." In fact, according to Ahumada, she only believed in "love one another as I have loved you" because she saw people who put it into practice all around her. The need for religion helped her give a name to what she felt, her inner experience, which led her to surround herself with people with whom she could share social concerns, moments of silence, and prayers. This experience led her to new paths, from Christian mystical texts to discovering works in other religious traditions and their practices such as yoga, zen, and the prayer of the heart. This eventually led her to Panikkar and the Advaita<sup>2</sup>, a concept that gave voice to her feelings, until she came to a spirituality that did not need to be associated with any specific religious framework, where people are the centre of religion, the religion of love.

Fons reflected on whether all these intimate and powerful personal experiences in a patriarchal society like ours have not been taken into account in any spaces, either general or religious, has led to the creation and generation more of the feeling of community as a Muslim, Catholic, or spiritual woman. In other words, she wondered if this transformation that has not been taken into account has produced a greater sense of community for women and has led the conversation towards the concept of intersectionality.<sup>3</sup> Dembaga defined and explained the origin of this word that serves as a tool that also makes "religious discrimination with regard to gender" visible and she highlighted community strategies for female believers to empower themselves. Women do not have a passive role to play within religious communities because they have sought strategies to



<sup>2</sup> Sanskrit word that Raimon Panikkar, Catalan philosopher and theologian, translated as "non-duality,"

<sup>3</sup> Social analysis tool (of social identities and systems of oppression) developed by African-American women in the USA.

move forward in this society and they have made their own community (for example, communities for recently arrived female immigrants). These communities are not passive, but full of active women as seen in the monastery where Abbess Abajar is from. Maria del Mar Abajar does not believe in individual spirituality but in the creation of community (because we are relational beings and we need to create communities, and the monastery also transforms the institution from within). Ahumada also supported this idea and added three essential verbs in her experience: sharing, cooperating, and collaborating. These active verbs are associated with actions that improve people’s quality of life and build communities (such as the link between community and nature through creating community gardens).

The spirituality of the individuals invited to this roundtable undoubtedly led them to become active agents in social transformation, within a spiritual community or beyond in society at large. As Ahumada stated, life is a whole and "you cannot separate spirituality from commitment, there is no commitment without spirituality, and there is no spirituality without commitment; nothing forces me to do anything," one must feel that they want to do something for others. It is essential to take part in the action, something that all three women have done both individually and communally.

## Background

Society has not made the intimate and collective spiritual and/or religious experiences of women visible, resulting in a passive image of women without giving value and recognition to the transformations they have produced both as believers and as non-believers.



## 2. Goals, objectives, and activities

**Goals:**

- 1. Give voice to women who have been transformed and make transformations through spirituality and religion.**
- 2. Generate discussions about spirituality and society today.**
- 3. Give visibility to the active transformational power of religious and/or spiritual communities.**
- 4. Produce and recognize the power of spiritual and religious transformation for communities.**

**Objectives and activities:****1. Recognize that women also hold and have played an important role for individual and social transformation in spiritual experiences (goals 1 and 2).**

- Organize debates, seminars, and lectures for young people on the historical invisibility of women in the world of religion and spirituality.
  - Seek information from representative women in the world of spirituality and religion in the Western and Eastern traditions. Which religious orders are you aware of that feature women? In other cultures and religions, is there also gender separation as regards monasteries, congregations, and groupings?
  - What is the view of current women inside and outside religion in your immediate context? What about the context of other religions that are also present in your environment?
  - Why has the image of women as passive agents been projected within religion and the spiritual world? Does women's empowerment exist within the religious world? What is the path towards transformation?
- Create a database of leading women within spirituality and search for books published by women that reflect on internal and external spiritual transformation experiences.
- Through reading spiritual references, lead debates and seminars where there is social, gender, belief, and religions diversity and compile the experiences in a document.

**2. Reflect, discuss, and analyse the concept of spirituality and religion and the needs of today's society (goal 2).**

- Through reading books, articles, and so on about spirituality and religion, discuss, showcase, and explain works, interviews, or opinion articles on the following aspects:
  - What do you think the phrase: “finding oneself that is seeking the absolute” by Maria del Mar Abajar means?
  - Why can't a woman hold Mass? Is it a question of religious limitations (of the church), of God, of abilities, or of a patriarchal vision? Produce debate and research.



- Have you heard of Focusing as a technique? How is it that there is a Focusing community at the Monastery of St. Benedict of Montserrat?
- Is spirituality another form of psychotherapy?
- Is our society burdened with noise that makes it difficult to find ourselves and our inner part of silence?
- Do we live in a society with too much pressure? Is the pace of life too fast?
- Do you think that people in today's society need to learn to develop as individuals? What shortcomings does our society have? What proposals from the spiritual or religious world can be carried out?
- What topics do spiritual communities address? (Are they contemplative issues or are social action plans designed?)

**3. Compile examples where it is evident that spirituality creates a community for social transformation (goals 2, 3, and 4).**

- Is social media used to create spiritual communities? What, for example? What other methods or tools are you familiar with?
- What topics are covered? Is there gender diversity when proposing, discussing, or reflecting on the issues presented?
- Provide evidence of which transformation is carried out (follow-up of experiences, interviews, etc.).
- Compile examples of how women organize in spiritual communities.
- Highlight which communities are in your neighbourhood, for example, groups that welcome recently arrived immigrants.
- Who handles it? What spaces do they occupy? What is their connection with other communities?
- Who takes care of the homeless? What proposals are behind them?
- Do a small study on the concept of intersectionality and share it within your educational field.
- Create lessons, Sites, and presentations with graphs, surveys, summaries, proposals, and interviews where all the reflections and observations made by young people are compiled.

